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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS
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SUBJECT: HOW TO RUN AN ELECTION IN A ONE-PARTY STATE

REF: VIENTIANE 360

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia M. Haslach, reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Communist Party members dominated the slate of candidates in the April 30 National Assembly elections: only two candidates of the 175 standing were "independents," and that by a stretch of imagination. The government touted the improved qualifications of the 115 newly-elected representatives, which include 29 women and 23 minorities, but the most meaningful qualification all shared was proven "patriotism," meaning Party loyalty. The Assembly will meet in early June, at which time it will elect the new President and Vice President, who in turn will name the new cabinet. With their propensity for seeing process as more important than substance, many Lao genuinely believe their "election" was free and fair. In our more jaundiced view, it was an exercise designed to further consolidate the Party's grip by purging the Assembly of non-performers. End summary.

The election

¶2. (SBU) Although National Assembly elections took place April 30, the National Election Committee wasn't able to announce the winners until May 10, after all scattered polling stations had delivered their ballots to provincial election committee ballot counters. In spite of admitted problems in the lead-up to the elections, including districts that were totally cut off as a result of washed-out roads and ballot boxes that had to be delivered by helicopter, the Election Committee boasted of a near-unanimous turnout of eligible voters. In the Vientiane area, that may not have been too far-fetched. Our informal tour of polling stations on election morning found villagers lined up even before the 6:00 AM poll station opening. Voting was compulsory: voters were issued a form to prove they had cast ballots and village chiefs were under pressure to get full turn-out of eligible voters. With many polling stations hooked up to public address systems that advertised non-stop the duty of citizens to vote, those eligible would have been hard-pressed to find an excuse for having missed out.

¶3. (SBU) By-and-large, Lao citizens took the election seriously, as a matter of national pride. The public announcements broadcast from polling stations played on the patriotism theme; we overheard one announcement telling voters they were demonstrating to a skeptical world that the Lao people cherished their voting rights and were faithful to

their government and the Party. Voters were expected to show their regard for the electoral process. Women who showed up to polling stations wearing slacks or "improper" dress were sent home. In spite of the guarantee of a "secret" ballot, election officials were on hand to inspect each ballot to make sure the voters took their responsibility seriously and voted correctly.

The outcome

14. (C) The delays in announcing the election results were, officially, due to the vagaries of running an election in areas without roads or electricity. We suspect that in remoter parts of the country, especially those inhabited by ethnic minorities, many villagers never saw a ballot or probably even had an inkling there was an election on, although the Lao government isn't admitting that.

15. (SBU) It may have taken more than a week to announce the results, but surely no one was on the edge of their seats waiting for the results. Predictably, the better-known members of the Party (including four Politburo members: Thongsing Thammavong, Bouasone Bouphavanh, Thongloun Sisoulith and Pany Yathoteu) won in their provinces by wide margins. One of the two "independent" candidates won; both independents were businesspeople with strong affiliations to the Party but who do not claim Party membership. The lone independent winner, Ousavanh Thiengthepvongsa, is an up-and-coming businessman who has started a "young people's" chapter of the Party-controlled Lao Chamber of Commerce.

16. (SBU) The vast majority of the winners, however, were tried-and-tested Communists, representing a range of

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backgrounds from line ministries, provincial governments, "mass front" organizations, schools, hospitals and the military. Election Committee spokesperson Viset Svengsuksa told the press when election results were announced that 44 incumbent members of the previous (5th) National Assembly and 71 new members had been elected. The winners were, according to Viset, both younger and better-educated than the previous Assembly, as well as more representative of the national make-up.

17. (C) The range and background of the candidates who sought election was no accident. During the campaign a National Assembly candidate came to us looking for "assistance" with his electioneering: in essence, he hoped we could fund his plan to pay voters for their support. In return he would "help the U.S." on human rights and other issues of concern to us. We turned down that tempting offer, but were intrigued by his description of the election process. An ethnic Hmong, he told us he had been "drafted" by the Lao Front for National Construction to run in Vientiane city, since each province had to provide at least one minority candidate, one female candidate, and one candidate representing the health and education sectors. There were some voluntary candidates, he told us (presumably including the two independents), but the majority of those seeking office were enlisted because of their qualifications under this "quota" system. The neat breakdown of the winners leads us to believe the results of the election were probably a foregone conclusion long before April 30.

National Assembly meets in June

18. (C) For Lao watchers in Vientiane, the real significance of the election won't be seen until the 6th National Assembly meets in early June. During its inaugural session, the new Assembly will elect the country's President and Vice President, who in turn will appoint the new cabinet. The decisions about who will take over as next President, as well as the shape of the new cabinet, have already been made, but to maintain the fiction that the Assembly has some independent authority to name the President, the new line-up

won't be formally announced until the Assembly meets. The new Assembly will also adopt the economic Five-Year Plan, another pro forma exercise to validate the economic development strategy decided by the Party at the 8th Party Congress in March.

Comment

¶9. (C) It is hard not to see the recent National Assembly elections as a cynical exercise conducted by the Party to give a veneer of respectability to its unchecked exercise of power. Although there are some hopeful signs along the edges (notably the election of an "independent," however closely he is tied to the Party), by-and-large the elections were designed to put into office a contingent of representatives with proven Party track records and unquestioned loyalty to its policies. The cross-sampling of the Lao electorate (ethnic minorities, women, educators, health workers and the like) may give the Assembly a semblance of diversity, but all share the same political outlook.

¶10. (C) The National Assembly has "matured" in some ways in recent years: the 5th Assembly, which sat from 2002 until early this year, proved especially willing to take the government to task for its shortcomings. However, that new-found confidence had little to do with a streak of independence and much more with the Party's conviction that the Assembly has an important role in pushing the government to more effectively implement Party policy and in creating the legal framework needed to convince the outside world that Laos abides by the rule of law. The mandate of the new Assembly that will take its seat in June is not to rock the boat, but to crack the whip over the government to convert Party diktat into practical application. End comment.

HASLACH